

ASSESSMENT OF THE IMAGE OF THE BORDER GUARD PROFESSION

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Abstract.

Purpose and aim of the study: *Based on an assessment of the image of the border guard profession, the research aims to develop proposals on the possibilities of managing the image with the aim of building an attractive image of and positive public opinions on the profession, contributing to sustainable competitiveness of the profession and attracting potential new employees to the service.*

Methodology: *Information for the research was obtained from research papers on the formation and management of the image of a profession, relevant legal acts and surveys.*

Main findings: *The research results revealed that the image of the border guard profession currently presented in the media and to the public is relatively positive, although there are increasingly frequent discussions on the low competitiveness of the border guard profession and other professions related to internal affairs in the labour market; consequently, the government services are beginning to lack personnel.*

Originality: *To date, the image of the border guard profession has been little recognized and the potential for it has been little researched.*

Implications: *The present research represents the basis for further research on developing the brand of the border guard profession.*

Keywords: *expert opinion, media monitoring, image of the border guard profession, public opinion, image management, image building.*

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Introduction

The State Border Guard currently faces serious challenges on the state border, as well as there is little interest in the border guard profession among potential employees and the service lacks employees, which in turn poses risks to the main mission of the State Border Guard, i.e. ensuring the inviolability of the Latvian state border and preventing illegal migration. Based on an assessment of the image of the border guard profession, the research aims to develop proposals on the possibilities of managing the image with the aim of building an attractive image of and positive public

opinions on the profession, contributing to sustainable competitiveness of the profession and attracting potential new employees to the service.

Specific research tasks:

- 1) to give insight into theoretical findings on the image of a profession and the possibilities of managing the image;
- 2) to monitor the image of the border guard profession in the media and to analyse current public opinions on the image of the border guard profession in Latvia;
- 3) to identify the opinions of Latvian border guards and external border guard experts about the image of the border guard profession;
- 4) to develop proposals on the possible management of the image of the border guard profession.

To achieve the research aim, the following *research methods* were employed:

- 1) descriptive data analysis for analysing and synthesize the collected data for drawing conclusions on the image of the border guard profession;
- 2) online surveys for identifying and examining the opinions of the public and border guards themselves on the image of the border guard profession;
- 3) online expert surveys for identifying and analysing the opinions of external experts and border guard experts on the image of the border guard profession;
- 4) content analysis for measuring the image of the border guard profession.

Research period: 2020-2023.

Research hypothesis: the image of the border guard profession needs to be managed to build an attractive image of the profession as well as promote the social status, authority and visibility of the profession.

To identify the contribution of the image of the border guard profession to the visibility of the profession among the public and increase its competitiveness in the labour market, the present research performed an analysis of the potential for the image of the border guard profession and the possibilities of managing the image, which represents the **novelty** of the research.

Research results and discussion

The concept of a profession has attracted the attention of many researchers, especially sociologists. The scientific community has considered it in various aspects and contexts. British sociologist Mike Sacks defines the concept of a profession as (..) a special kind of occupation (or profession) that may be entered into only after special training that

combines both a professional ethos and special skills. (..) it possesses unique and positive characteristics, including distinctive knowledge and skills (..) (Sacks, 2012). However, Canadian researchers Sylvia R. Cruess, Sharon Johnston and Richard L. Cruess refer to a profession as an (..) occupation, the basic element of which is work based on a complex set of knowledge and skills possessed (...). The members of a profession are governed by codes of ethics and are committed to competence, integrity and morality, altruism and the promotion of public goods in their field (Cruess et al., 2010). In their research study *Nursing Professionalism: An Evolutionary Concept Analysis*, Iranian researchers Fataneh Ghadirian, Mahvash Salsali and Mohammad Ali Cheraghi have analysed the characteristics of a profession and concluded that (..) a profession is characterized by a series of factors: 1) the body of knowledge acquired through formal education, 2) a high level of competence, 3) inclusion criteria, 4) the professional certification process, and 5) a set of behavioural and attitudinal norms, known as professionalization (Ghadirian, 2014). After researching the nature of professionalism, Israeli sociologist Rakefet Sela-Sheffy refers to status and power as an important factor in the viability of a profession, emphasizing that, however, there might be different views about where professional status lies. She also states that the formation of a “profession entails formalizing and standardizing knowledge and skills, and establishing means of control of their acquisition and implementation, to secure legitimacy and autonomy (..) (Sela-Sheffy, 2023).

The term image (..) is a kind of image of public ideas and stereotypes, which has emerged from experience. Sociologist Aleksejs Vorobjovs, agreeing with the ideas of French scientist Gustav Lebon, emphasizes the role of the image in the formation of public opinion: “An image is an emotionally saturated idea that embodies liveliness and later causes action (..)”. According to A.Vorobjovs, an image is something that inspires and influences a certain part of society, which willingly obeys a certain character with their emotional experience and attitude (..) (Vorobjovs, 2002). Some authors have found that (..) an image could be defined as a picture of public perceptions that has a certain stimulating message and its own extent of credibility (Zarina et al., 2022). The image of a profession represents a description of the characteristics of a profession, which is characterized by most of the characteristics of the profession (Dobrzinskiene, 2121) and by higher education, knowledge and social status (Adams, 2023). According to Dutch researcher Yvonne ten Hoeve, the image of a profession is one of the elements that shape the professional identity and self-confidence of employees (Hoeve, 2013). L. M. Roberts has found that a professional image forms through interpersonal communication because “people constantly observe (..) behaviours and

create theories about (..) competence, the character and commitment, which are quickly disseminated throughout (..) the workplace” (Roberts, 2017). In the context of the image of a profession, it should be understood that individual identity is one of the inclusive factors in the development of professional identity in a person. The authors agree with an opinion that (..) professional identity emerges (..) from the process of activity development (Armstrong, 2017), which is influenced by the working environment, work values, educational attainments, satisfaction with the job and self-confidence, traditional cultural and social values (Hoeve, 2013) and (..) forms through interaction with other colleagues and has a strong influence on the self-esteem and empowerment of the members of a particular profession (..) (Hoeve, 2017). Accordingly, an individual’s subjective feelings, in interaction with external factors, stimulate the formation of initially individual belongingness and later professional identity.

Developments at the State Border Guard and the professional Code of Ethics are important in shaping the image of the border guard profession and in strengthening the professional identity of border guards themselves. According to the Code of Ethics, the image of the border guard profession should involve values and qualities such as: professionalism, diligence, attentiveness, accuracy, cleanliness, tidiness, orderliness, practicality, hospitality, honesty, motivation, objectivity, politeness, positivity. The Code of Ethics also condemns an arrogant and authoritative management style, abusive behaviour, rude behaviour, greed, self-interest, interest lobbying, “fraternization” for self-interest etc. (Valsts robežsardzes amatpersonas..., 2020).

After summarizing the theoretical findings, the authors of the present paper conclude that the profession image context indicates the overall picture of attributes and values of a profession, while at the same time presenting it as a unique, constantly-functioning as well as dynamically-changing system of perceptions and activities. The image of a profession is a purposeful and unified picture of perception of social activities, which is demonstrated by a professional through his/her specific knowledge, unique skill and performance in the process of multifactorial interaction. This shows the social status, authority and visibility of the profession itself in society. Besides, the authors conclude that research on a profession and the image thereof could be conducted by employing various methods and from different social and research aspects.

To assess the image of the border guard profession, the authors monitored the image of this profession in the media (in the national media, in the national language) as part the research, employing the random selection method and selecting research papers according to certain keywords. The authors set a three-year research period from 2020 to 2022,

which was a long enough period to assess the image of the border guard profession reflected in the media. Analysing the media and the availability of their archives, the authors mainly focused on the research papers available on the Internet. The list of research papers also included those referring to television shows or radio broadcasts. To make the assessment of the image in the media more comprehensive, the authors reviewed the national/public (state), commercial, sectoral and regional media portals and websites, as well as one regional printed newspaper reflecting life in a border area.

Monitoring media content on the image of a border guard in the period from 2020 to 2022 showed that, overall, the image of the border guard profession was quite positive. The media had quite extensively informed the public about the daily routine of border guards, their professional activities and achievements as well as reflected their social activities; however, both the border guards themselves and experts (border guard and external experts) believed that in order to improve the image of the border guard profession and promote the visibility and popularity of the profession, the media, especially social media, should present the border guard profession even more actively and reflect the real routine of a border guard.

The authors concluded that in recent years, the media increasingly informed the public about the growing shortage of personnel in the State Border Guard and the factors contributing to it: low and uncompetitive remuneration, heavy workloads and employee dissatisfaction, which, of course, had a negative impact on the image of the border guard profession. Both the border guards themselves and the experts named the same problems, thereby emphasizing the impacts of the factors on the competitiveness of the profession in the labour market.

To identify public opinions about the image of the border guard profession, the authors conducted an anonymous survey consisting of 20 questions from 14 to 18 April 2022. The survey was placed on the online survey portal Visidati.lv created by the survey company SolidData. To identify comprehensive public opinions about the image of border guards, the authors set the range of potential respondents. To obtain quality data, the following criteria were set for the target audience: persons who use computers, mobile phones and social media on a daily basis; young people aged 15 and over; adults up to 69 years; persons from various regions of Latvia. Given the popularity of social media, potential respondents were reached using the Messenger tool of the social medium Facebook. For personal reliability and credibility, the authors used their Facebook profile accounts. Random sampling was applied to examine and select the elements of the sample. To identify the opinions of the public, the authors reached

people of different ages, genders and educational levels: both familiar people and complete strangers. In total, 150 individual invitations were sent to participate in the anonymous survey: 50 persons aged 15 to 29 years, 50 persons aged 30 to 39 years and 50 persons aged 40 and over. It should be noted that the authors have already published part of the results of this survey in a research paper entitled *The Image of the Border Guard in Society* (Zarina et al., 2022). Out of 150 potential respondents reached, almost half participated in the survey, i.e. 69 (46%). Of them, 28 were men aged 17 to 50 and 41 were women aged 17 to 62. The average age of the respondents was 36.9 years. The respondents were from Jelgava, Valmiera, Rezekne, Daugavpils, Jurmala, Riga, Pieriga as well as towns, sparsely populated areas and rural areas.

From 16 April to 1 May 2023 as part of the research, the authors conducted an online survey on the image of the border guard profession also among border guards. The purpose of the survey was to identify the opinions of Latvian border guards about the image of the profession they represented, the factors therein and the possibilities for improving the image. To reach the target audience, the implementation of the survey was coordinated with the head of the State Border Guard. In total, 129 Latvian border guards responded to the survey invitation and answered 16 questions. The profile of the survey participants was identified, broken down by gender, age and place of service. In total, 71 (55% of the total respondents) men and 58 (45%) women took part in the survey. The most respondents were those aged 40 to 49 (54 persons, 41.9%) and 30 to 39 (49 persons, 38%). However, those aged between 18 and 29 (16 persons, 12.4%) were the least represented respondents. The authors found that in view of the fact that a service period of a border guard is up to 50 years and a border guard rarely extends the service period, respondents aged 50 and over were quite inactive, as only 10 persons or 7.8% of the total respondents took part in the survey. A breakdown of the respondents' service places revealed that the most respondents were from the Ventspils Regional Department (22 persons, 17.1%) and the Vilaka Regional Department (21 persons, 16.3%) of the State Border Guard. The answers were also given by: 20 persons (15.5%) from the Ludza Regional Department, 18 persons (14%) from the State Border Guard College, 14 persons (10.9%) from the State Border Guard Headquarters, 13 persons (10.1%) from the Daugavpils Regional Department, 8 persons (6.3%) from the Riga Regional Department, 7 persons (5.5%) from the Main Department and 6 persons (4.7%) from the Aviation Department of the State Border Guard.

Most of the public and border guards interviewed recognized the importance of the profession in the country.

It was important for the border guards to be aware the role of their work and gain public appreciation. The survey found that 65% respondents were proud or partially proud to be border guards and belong to the community of this profession (Figure 1).

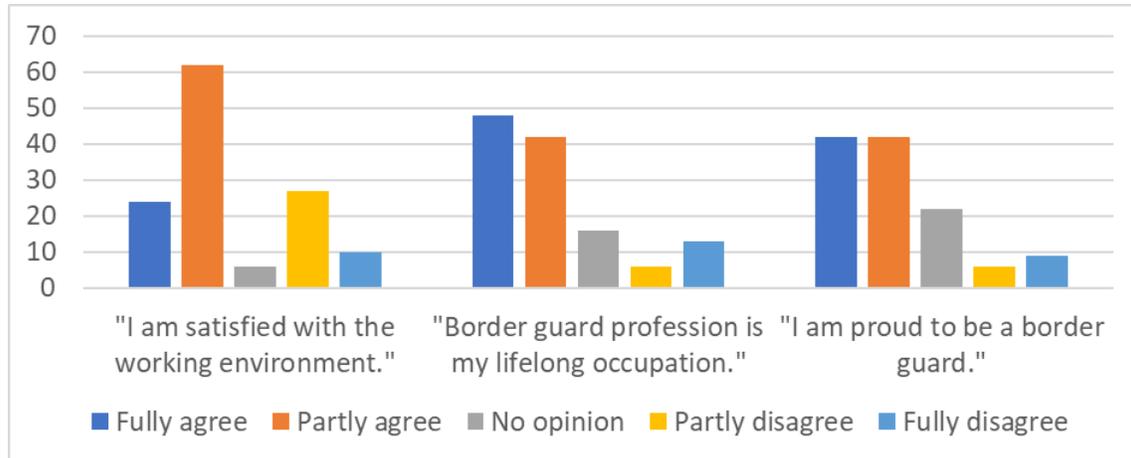


Fig.1. Distribution of respondent answers to the question "Do you agree with the following statements?" (based on the survey of border guards, 2023)

In contrast to long-standing border guards, the younger generation of border guards were not sure that they would be self-realized in this profession throughout their service period (up to 50 years). The survey participants partly agreed that the border guard profession was prestigious in Latvia today, meaning that the public had no confidence in the prestige of this profession today. Most of the border guards partly agreed with this statement as well (Figure 2).

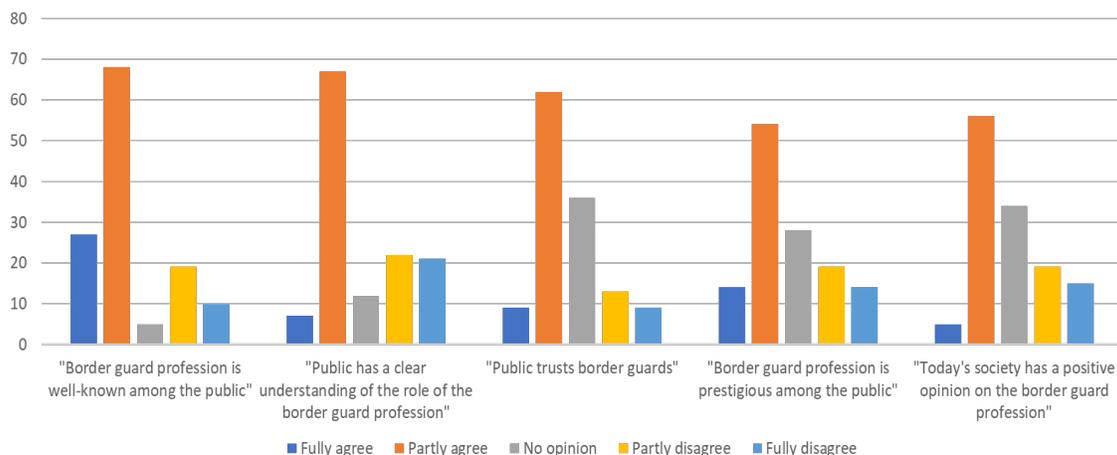


Fig.2. Distribution of respondent answers to the question "Do you agree with the statements below about the image of the border guard profession?" (based on the survey of border guards, 2023)

According to the border guards, the prestige and competitiveness of the profession was not promoted at the national level, yet it was done at the professional level.

From 16 April to 15 May 2023 as part of the research, the authors conducted two online expert surveys on the image of the border guard profession: an expert survey on the image of the border guard profession and the possibilities of managing the image for the heads of the border guard departments, and a survey of external experts on the image of the border guard profession and the possibilities of managing it. The purpose of the surveys was to identify the opinions of and ratings by the experts regarding the image of the border guard profession and the possibilities of managing it. The profile of the experts was built up based on their ages and work experience in their field of professional activity. In total, 16 experts participated in both surveys, including 11 heads of the border guard departments, as well as 5 external experts. Both the public and the border guards and experts recognized that every border guard was jointly responsible for promoting the prestige and reputation of the border guard profession. According to some experts, any border guard, by developing his/her professional identity, contributes to increasing the prestige of the profession.

The survey results revealed that the respondents were quite knowledgeable about working conditions for border guards and admitted that in this profession, the most burdensome obstacles were as follows: the tough working environment, the military hierarchy, bureaucratic procedures within the service, increased risks of danger, heavy workloads and illegal border crossers. Both the border guards and the experts were of the same opinion, stressing that the above-mentioned factors in the working environment should be mitigated and the working conditions for border guards should be improved by developing border guarding infrastructure, introducing modern technologies into border guarding, improving communication and raising salaries. The survey revealed that when meeting a border guard, the public, first, assess the appearance, physical fitness level, communication skills and professionalism of the border guard, second, are aware of the specifics of the border guard work and the achievements, and third, are happy to learn positive things about the border guards, fourth, are not happy about negative news and observations regarding the border guard's inaction or criminal behaviour.

Today, managing the image of the profession is important for every industry as well as institution that manages the work of professionals in the industry and demonstrates the social status, authority and visibility of the profession itself in society. To influence the public's perception of the work of professionals, present the uniqueness, importance, dynamism and

development of the profession and influence the competitiveness of the profession itself in the labour market, it is necessary to manage the image of the profession. Therefore, to change public perceptions of the profession, ensure public trust and attract potential employees to the government institution, national policy makers and the administration of the State Border Guard need to change the usual management pattern both at the national and the institutional level, increasingly introducing flexible business management tools, for example, implementing profession image marketing activities.

In the opinion of the authors, forming and managing the image of the profession should start inside the organization/institution in which, first, there should be a discussion with the members of the profession about both their satisfaction with their working environment and their contribution to the development of the institution/industry; second, the satisfaction of users of services provided by members of the profession should be measured and analysed to find out what the image of the profession is at a particular period. Third, there should be a strategic plan for improving the image of the profession, with members of the profession playing an important role. The most motivated members of the profession should be encouraged to play a leadership role and encourage other colleagues to present their profession. Fourth, the prevailing stereotypes about the image of the profession should be eliminated and an attractive image of the profession should be created by showing the real work of professionals in the media. Fifth, members of the profession should be given an opportunity to raise their qualifications and realize themselves in the professional field. In the nearest future, it is desirable to design a special marketing programme for the image of the profession, which would include three levels of activities: at the national level, a long-term support programme should be developed to contribute to the professional status and prestige of border guards through improving the working environment and increasing the competitiveness of the border guard profession. At the organizational level, the administration of the State Border Guard and policy makers should design and implement a policy and programme aimed at contributing to the image of the border guard profession, design a strategic action plan for raising the professional self-confidence of border guards as well as guidelines for recruiting new employees. At the individual level, border guards should daily improve their professional image and present it, as well as popularize their professional image by their own examples through performing their official responsibilities and acting professionally and responsibly.

Coming up with proposals for improving the image of the border guard profession, the experts were of the same opinion and recommended that

managing the image of the border guard profession should focus on strengthening the sense of satisfaction in the border guards and developing the internal communication culture at the State Border Guard, which is based on trust and respect, as well as on increasing the competitiveness of the profession by raising border guard salaries and improving the working environment for them.

Conclusions and suggestions

1. Successfully managing the image of the profession leads to the attractiveness and viability of the image and confirms the legitimacy of the image in the eyes of stakeholders. It involves strategic communication, brand development, media monitoring as well as organizational performance of stakeholders: identification, self-realization and representation. In principle, it is a marketing strategy aimed at improving and changing public opinions about the image.
2. The media monitoring, the survey of the public and the survey of border guards showed that in Latvian society, there are stereotypical views about the image of the border guard profession and about public expectations (the image of the profession is idealized and detached from reality); therefore, many young individuals are confused about their career choice when starting their service.
3. The internal satisfaction of members of the profession with their jobs, the working environment, as well as the satisfaction of individuals and the public with the performance and work quality of members of the profession is of great importance in shaping the image of the profession. The more positive the working environment is, the more motivated, satisfied, open and kinder are the members of the profession, and the higher the quality of their work is, the more satisfied the public are.
4. Shaping and managing the image of the border guard profession should be aimed at changing public perceptions because this, in turn, makes it necessary to develop diverse communication with the public. The visibility and public appreciation of the image of the profession requires a dialogue between the stakeholders: the leading national institution, members of the profession and the public. Maintaining feedback increases public trust as well as builds and manages positive impressions of the profession.
5. To change public perceptions of the profession, ensure public trust and attract potential employees to the government institution, national policy makers and the administration of the State Border Guard need to change the usual management pattern, increasingly introducing flexible

business management tools, e.g. implementing profession image marketing activities.

6. To improve the image of the profession in the future, the impact of satisfaction of border guards on the image of the profession, as well as the impact of the image of the profession on the competitiveness of the profession itself should be researched more extensively.

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